

ANTI-TRINITARIAN NATURE OF EARLY ADVENTISM

Updated October 3, 2001 (first published December 26, 2000) (David W. Cloud, Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061-0368, 866-295-4143, fbns@wayoflife.org) - Early pioneers of Seventh-day Adventism, which was formed in 1844, denied the doctrine of the Trinity. These included James White (husband of “prophetess” Ellen White), William White, James Edson, Uriah Smith, Joseph Bates, J.H. Waggoner, J.B. Frisbie, G.I. Butler, J.N. Andrews, D.W. Hull, E.J. Waggoner, R.F. Cottrell, A.J. Dennis, J.N. Loughborough, A.T. Jones, D.M. Canright, and W.W. Prescott. They taught that God the Father alone is the One supreme, eternal, self-existent, immortal God; that the Holy Spirit is the representative of God who comes forth from the Father but is not a Person in his own right; and that Jesus Christ derived his divine attributes by virtue of inheritance, that he preceded from the Father, and that he will always be subject to the Father.

Consider the following quotes:

“The way spiritualizers this way have disposed of or denied the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ is first using the old unscriptural Trinitarian creed” (James White, *The Day Star*, Jan. 24, 1846). “To assert that the sayings of the Son and his apostles are the commandments of the Father, is as wide from the truth as the old Trinitarian absurdity that Jesus Christ is the very and eternal God” (White, *Review and Herald*, Aug. 5, 1852, p. 52).

“We should rather mistrust that the Sunday God [the Trinity] came from the same [pagan] source that Sunday-keeping did” (J.B. Friesbie, “The Sunday God,” *Review and Herald*, Feb. 28, 1854).

“There are many objections which we might urge [against the Trinity], but on account of our limited space we shall reduce them to the three following: 1. It is contrary to common sense. 2. It is contrary to scripture. 3. Its origin is pagan and fabulous...” (J.N. Loughborough, *Review and Herald*, Nov. 5, 1861).

“... the Trinity, or the triune God, is unknown to the Bible” (R.F. Cottrell, *Review and Herald*, June 1, 1869).

“The Scriptures abundantly teach the pre-existence of Christ and his divinity; but they are entirely silent in regard to a Trinity” (J.H. Waggoner, *The Atonement*, chapter four, “The Doctrine of a Trinity Subversive of the Atonement,” 1872, p. 165).

“The Scriptures nowhere speak of Christ as a created being, but on the contrary plainly state that he was begotten of the Father. ... These testimonies show that Christ is now an object of worship equally with the Father; but they do not prove that with him he holds an eternity of past existence” (Uriah Smith, Thoughts on Daniel and Revelation). [This book originally contained many non-Trinitarian statements until they were removed in 1944.]

“...the Bible never uses the phrases, ‘Trinity,’ ‘triune God,’ ‘three in one,’ ‘the holy three,’ ‘God the Holy Ghost,’ etc. but it does emphatically say there is only one God, the Father. And every argument to prove three Gods in one person, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost, all of them of one substance, and every way equal to each other, and all three forming but one, contradicts itself, contradicts reason, and contradicts the Bible...” (D.M. Canright, Review and Herald, Aug. 29, 1878).

Early Adventist statements of faith were non-Trinitarian. For example, the 1872 statement said: “That there is one God, a personal, spiritual Being, the Creator of all things, omnipotent, omniscient, and eternal, infinite in wisdom, holiness, justice, goodness, truth, and mercy; unchangeable, and everywhere present by His representative, the Holy Spirit. ... That there is one Lord Jesus Christ, and Son of the Eternal Father, the One by whom God created all things...” Thus the Holy Spirit was not seen as the third person of the Trinity but merely as the representative of God, and Jesus Christ is not eternal and co-equal with God the Father but merely the one by whom God created.

Ellen White’s son, William, plainly stated that the Holy Spirit is not a person: “There are many Scriptures which speak of the Father and the Son and the absence of Scripture making similar reference to the united work of the Father and the Holy Spirit or of Christ and the Holy Spirit, has led me to believe that the spirit without individuality was the representative of the Father and the Son throughout the universe, and it was through the Holy Spirit that they dwell in our hearts and make us one with the Father and the Son...” (Letter from W.C. White to H.W. Carr, April 30, 1935).

The following are other quotations from a variety of Adventist church leaders and historians verifying the fact that the early Adventist pioneers were non-Trinitarian.

“From my personal knowledge the doctrine of the ‘Trinity-Godhead,’ was not taught by Seventh-day Adventists during the early days of my ministry” (Letter from H. Cottrell to L.E. Froom, Sept. 16, 1931).

“I understand that some of our leading men in the beginning were opposed to the doctrine of the Trinity, at least as expressed by certain Trinitarians” (Letter from A.W. Spalding to H.C. Lacey, June 2, 1947).

“Most assuredly our people were anti-Trinitarians, when we (the Lacey family) accepted the ‘truth’ in 1888” (Letter from H.C. Lacey to A.W. Spalding, June 5, 1947).

“Mrs. Soper calls to our attention the fact that you are seeking information as to the positions held by our early workers concerning the Trinity, the personality of the Holy Spirit, and the pre-existence of Christ as this may be revealed in their writings. I think we will have to concede that our early workers were not Trinitarians” (Letter from Arthur L. White to L.E. Froom, Dec. 7, 1955).

“...Seventh-day Adventist pioneers held generally an anti-Trinitarian position. ... Nevertheless, what cannot be contested is that in the first four or five decades of the Seventh-day Adventist movement there was in its ranks a widespread rejection of the term ‘Trinity.’ And whenever an Adventist writer declared on the nature of God, the declaration was anti-Trinitarian” (Nestor Alberro, Ellen G. White and the Term “Trinity,” 1983, pp. 60,61).

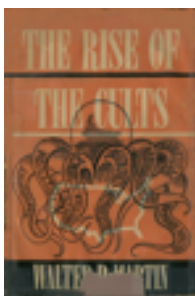
“Like many early Adventists he [Uriah Smith] rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, regarding Christ as a created being and the Holy Spirit as a divine influence” (Gary Land, American National Biography, 20:300; Land also edited Adventism in America: A History).

THE CHANGE IN ADVENTIST DOCTRINE PERTAINING TO THE TRINITY

Throughout the first part of the twentieth century there were hot debates within Adventism on the subject of the Trinity, the eternality of Christ, the Personality of the Holy Spirit, and related doctrines. When J.H. Kellogg taught Trinitarian doctrine in his book *Living Temple* in 1903, he was resisted by G.I. Butler and other Adventist leaders. The 1919 Adventist Bible Conference witnessed similar battles on both sides of the Trinity. Obviously there were still many leaders within Adventism in the early part of the century who rejected the Trinity. It was under the direction of Leroy Froom that Seventh-day Adventism gradually rejected the non-Trinitarian position of its founders. His 1928 book, *The Coming of the Comforter*, taught Trinitarian doctrine. A Trinitarian statement appeared in print as an official Adventist position for the first time in 1931. There were still many Adventists who did not believe in the Trinity, but this was becoming the minority view. In 1941, a uniform baptismal covenant was published which included Trinitarian language. Froom was one of the 13-member committee that drew up the covenant. In 1942, a committee was appointed to delete non-Trinitarian

statements from Uriah Smith's book on Daniel and Revelation, and the 1944 revision contained these changes. At that time, Adventist leaders sought to revise their own history by claiming that Ellen White was a Trinitarian and that she did not support the non-Trinitarian position of other Adventist pioneers. That this was an error is evident by the fact that her husband, James White, remained an avowed anti-Trinitarian to his death and Ellen never sought to correct him or other anti-Trinitarian leaders. Her sons William and James were both anti-Trinitarians. Furthermore, Ellen White publicly supported Uriah Smith's book until her death in 1915. The fact is that Ellen White's own statements touching the doctrine of the Trinity were somewhat nebulous, as her own son William admitted, and could be used both by Trinitarians and non-Trinitarians.

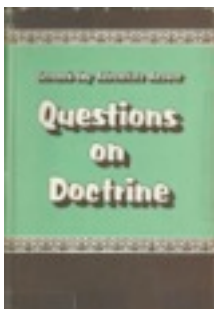
THE ROLE OF WALTER MARTIN



In 1955 and 1956 Walter Martin and Donald Barnhouse, both prominent Evangelicals, held a series of secret meetings with Adventist leaders, one of whom was Leroy Froom. Martin had treated Seventh-day Adventists as a cult in his 1955 book, *The Rise of the Cults*. Though he did not devote a separate section of the book to Adventism, Martin plainly listed Seventh-day Adventism as one of "The Big Five" cults (p. 12). The goal of the Adventist leaders was to convince Martin and Barnhouse to reclassify Adventism as an Evangelical group rather than as a cult. That they were successful is evident in that Martin's 1956 book, *The Christian and the Cults*, did not even mention Adventism.



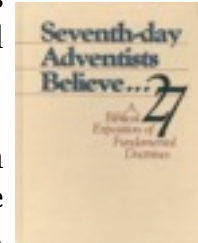
Seeing that for the first time in their history they could convince key Protestant leaders that they were genuine brethren, the Adventists published "Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine" in 1957. Their heresies, such as Ellen White's role as a prophetess and their denial of Hell, were toned down and whitewashed for a Protestant audience. Earlier heretical statements such as the requirement of sabbath worship and the works of the law for salvation were omitted. Free grace was given a more prominent role than it had played in many earlier publications. Questions on Doctrine omitted the harsh condemnation of "Sunday keeping" Christians that was found in earlier Adventist publications. The book deceptively denied that Adventists had stated that Sunday worship is the mark of the beast. The book downplayed the Adventist doctrine that their group is the direct fulfillment of Scripture prophecy. Furthermore, the false Arian doctrines of Adventist pioneers was completely ignored and a Trinitarian



statement of faith was speciously submitted as if it represented the views of Adventists all along.



Walter Martin used Questions on Doctrine to completely rewrite his warning about Seventh-day Adventism. In his 1960 book, The Truth About Seventh-day Adventism, Martin classified them as a Christian denomination. This new position, which viewed Adventism as evangelical rather than as a cult, subsequently appeared in Martin's influential book The Kingdom of the Cults, which was first published in 1965 and which has been reprinted dozens of times since.



Having accomplished their purpose, the Adventists let Questions on Doctrine go out of print. In 1988 they replaced it with an even more watered-down version titled Seventh-day Adventists Believe...A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines.

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISM STILL A CULT

The Adventist denomination is much the same heretical entity that was so plainly and firmly condemned by Bible-believing churches in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its denial of Hell and its exaltation of “prophetess” Ellen White alone would require that we reject it. It is the Bible-believing churches that have changed. Popular Evangelicalism today has become too blind to discern truth from error and too weak to condemn error when it is found. Just a few decades ago men such as A. Hoekema, John R. Rice, and M.R. DeHaan, who considered Seventh-day Adventism a dangerous false group, were in the overwhelming majority among those who professed to be evangelical Bible-believing preachers. This is not so today. Most major Evangelical publishing houses, for example, will no longer publish material derogatory toward Adventism or Catholicism.

The doctrine of the Trinity aside, this change has come not because Adventism has moved closer to the Bible in the past 50 years, but because Evangelicals have moved farther away from it.

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